

Testimony on Raised Bills 5493, 438, 5491, and 440

Submitted by Wendy Lecker
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Chairman Gaffey, Chairman Fleischmann and Members of the Education Committee:

I am a parent of three public school children in Stamford and co-president of Stamford's Parent Teacher Council, the umbrella organization for Stamford's twenty PTOs. I would have liked to have presented this testimony in person. However, we are facing the possibility of over nine million dollars in cuts to our local school budget and this evening is our public hearing on Stamford's school budget. Therefore, I am writing to oppose Raised Bill 5493, the "money follows the child" funding proposal, the removal of fiscal restraints in authorizing charter schools in Raised Bill 438, and the portion of Raised Bill 5491 concerning a "parent trigger." I also oppose using student test scores to evaluate teachers (Raised Bills 440 and 5491).

I. Funding Proposal in Raised Bill 5493

The funding proposal in Raised Bill 5493 will have dire consequences for school districts like Stamford.

To require local districts to pay the net current expenditure for each child attending a charter school has been shown by our State Department of Education ("SDE") to drain local school districts of a disproportionate amount of necessary resources to help all children, in order to fund the few attending schools over which that district has absolutely no control or say. Charter schools are state creations, and they are separate districts. SDE has already shown that if this proposal were enacted, Stamford, a district of 15,000 students, would immediately lose 51% of its ECS allocation in order to fund 266 students. (See SDE Presentation on Charter School Funding, page 13, attached).

It doesn't take much foresight to predict that a small increase in the number of Stamford students attending charters would eat up not only our ECS allocation, but would cost us millions more. Our city has no way to make up for the money that would be lost to our school infrastructure, at a time where we are struggling to hold on to the teachers and resources we have. SDE has also shown that on average, Connecticut charter schools already spend more per student than their traditional public school counterparts. (See page 8 of SDE Charter School Documents, attached) In Stamford, the two charter schools each spend about \$8,000 more per child than Stamford's public schools spend per child. (See page 8 of SDE Charter School Documents, attached)

Over forty percent of Stamford's public school students are eligible for free and reduced price lunch; 37% come from homes where English is not the home language, almost 15% of our children are not fluent in English and almost 10% of our children require special education services. Despite this need, Stamford receives about \$500 per child as its ECS allocation- one tenth the median allocation of other districts in DRG H. To deprive our needy children of funds, when we already receive so little, is manifestly unjust.

Moreover, as has been pointed out by SDE and by educational finance experts such as Professor Bruce Baker of Rutgers, the "money follows the child" idea embodied by this legislation is not grounded in any sound educational financial theories or evidence. (Professor Baker's critique is attached).

As you know, the State Board of Education rejected this proposal after hearing a presentation by SDE. After rejecting the funding scheme put forth in this legislation, the State Board resolved to establish a commission to examine funding strategies. Would it not be wiser to wait until this commission studies funding mechanisms and possible effects of those mechanisms before enacting legislation? Since no serious study of funding strategies has been done on charter schools, why enact a baseless scheme that threatens to deprive the majority of students in a district of needed educational resources before this commission has done its work?

In fact, why examine charter school funding without looking at whether children in all public schools are getting adequate funding? What advantage do charter school students hold over every other public school student in Connecticut?

Sound education policy cannot be made by favoring ideology over methodology and by satisfying the needs of the few at the expense of the vast majority of public school students. As John Dewey said, "what the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must the community want for all its children." We must strive to keep the interests of all public school children in this state in mind while crafting our educational policy.

II. Raised Bill 438

I respectfully submit that it is financially irresponsible to remove fiscal restraints from the consideration of whether to authorize a charter school. To allow charter authorization without any regard for the financial impact it at odds with building a coherent educational policy across this state. It appears that this proposed provision is designed with the idea that localities will now have to pay for charter school. As I stated above, to require local districts to pay for charter school students would have a disastrous effect on local school budgets, and as a consequence, the ability for local school districts to serve ALL their students.

III. Parent Trigger- Raised Bill 5493

Although I agree that there is an urgent need to empower parents to help improve their children's education, I disagree that a "parent trigger" as proposed in this legislation, is the proper avenue either to empower parents or to improve student learning. Moreover, I strongly believe that a "parent trigger" mechanism threatens to destabilize our public school system, a move which would undermine school and student improvement.

In Stamford, we have worked very hard to turn 20 disparate schools into one cohesive school district, where every child in every school learns the same high level curriculum, the same quality of teaching. And I give our Superintendent Joshua Starr a great deal of credit in this endeavor. This unity extends beyond curriculum. When we realized we were out of balance demographically, our school district went through a public, painful process of redistricting. Parents came out to talk, to plead, to scream. And they came to realize that their school was an integral part of an entire system that needed to be redistricted- that their needs had to fit into the needs of the district.

Now, we are coming to terms with the fact that segregation has extended into our classrooms - in the form of ability grouping. We are again going through an important, yet painful, public process to dismantle that system and improve education for all.

Our School District is One Community

Parents have a voice, and we do everything we can to make sure it is heard- we're not perfect, but we are making great strides in involving parents. We hold forums in different locations in the city to ensure wide representation. And when parents express themselves, it's not in some sneaky petition that who knows who has really read, but in a public hearing. The public nature

tends to weed out those small groups who may have a selfish, perhaps undermining, interest from those groups that really have a valid complaint.

All of these processes have reinforced that as a school system, we are one interdependent community - for many, it is through the public school system that they feel they are part of this city as a whole.

We know that NCLB has some inherent unfairness. Since a school must meet AYP for every subgroup, the more diverse the school is, the more chances it has to fail. Sometimes very good schools miss the mark because of one subgroup that couldn't possibly be expected to meet proficiency. Of course we want all children to be proficient, but we know that some make terrific strides and haven't gotten there yet, and because of that, a good school may be deemed in need of improvement.

To take advantage of this unfairness in the federal law and allow a small group to destabilize our school district and to tear at the fabric of this community is destructive. It will not improve instruction- it will just allow splinter groups to get their own school, at the expense of all other children in our system.

As parents, we have a stake in education. But just because we have children in school, that does not make us experts in educational policy. This proposed legislation takes the decision making power out of the hands of those experts.

True Parent Empowerment?

Parents should absolutely have a say in their children's education. But the mechanisms for a parent voice are already there. It is up to the community to be vigilant and ensure those mechanisms are used. I fail to see how the "parent trigger" adds to the already existing mechanisms. If 51% of parents in a school can get together to sign a petition, then they can get together to appear at board of education meetings and hearings, to meet with the administration, and to contact their local and state representatives. These actions would have equal if not more effect, and would also show more thought has been put into this process than merely signing a piece of paper. If parents do not have the ability to get together, yet a petition is still signed, then that is an indication that an outside force is driving this change in the school, not the parents themselves. No matter what mechanism we have on paper to increase parent participation, we need the will of a group to turn that mechanism into positive action. And frankly, those mechanisms already exist. A parent trigger, for the minimal addition to parental power it might promise, poses far too many risks to a viable school system and community.

"Parent Trigger" is Unsupported by Any Evidence

The urgent need to improve student learning demands that we use proven methods to raise student achievement. These proven methods include quality teaching, quality preschool, reasonable class size, enough time on task, adequate school facilities, adequate books, pencils, desks and other instrumentalities of learning, and a high level curriculum, to name a few. By contrast, the "parent trigger" has NEVER been shown to raise achievement. With all the proven methods to increase student learning, I do not know why we should embrace a questionable practice fraught with potential for abuse, and one which is completely unproven.

In Stamford we try very hard not to be about my child or my school, but about ALL our children in all our schools. I respectfully ask that you, too, be about all children in all public schools in this state. That is why I respectfully request that you reject the parent trigger aspect of this legislation.

IV. Race to the Top vs. Sound Educational Policy

Charter school expansion

Up to now, Connecticut has had a measured approach to authorization of and enrollment in charter schools. The limits on charter school expansion have been praised by scholars. For example, Professor Gary Miron, who has conducted studies for both the SDE and for Conncan, attributed the promise he saw in charter schools in this state to Connecticut's strict limits on expansion. Professor Miron, an expert in charter schools, notes in a recent article (which is attached) that evidence across this nation has shown that when it comes to charter schools, quantity is the enemy of quality. Professor Miron also points out that overall in this nation, the evidence shows that charter schools are performing at a level below traditional public schools. As he states, "repeated studies over the past decade have failed to find consistent, positive academic change produced by the vast majority of charter schools." The evidence also shows that there is little evidence that a charter school more likely than a traditional school system to develop innovative programs or practices. Professor Miron cautions that prior to jumping on the expansion bandwagon, "more research is needed to understand the negative correlations between charter performance on the one hand, and charter expansion and privatization on the other."

Furthermore, there is evidence, both from Connecticut and in two new nationwide studies, that charter schools increase segregation. (See "Connecticut's Charter Schools: A Closer Look" <http://www.scribd.com/doc/27672436/Charter-Schools-a-Closer-Look>, Miron, G., Urschel, J. L., Mathis, W. J., & Tornquist, E. (2010). *Schools without Diversity: Education Management Organizations, Charter Schools and the Demographic Stratification of the American School System*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit, <http://epicpolicy.org/publication/schools-without-diversity>; rankenberg, E., Siegel-Hawley, G., Wang, J. (2010). *Choice without Equity: Charter School Segregation and the Need for Civil Rights Standards*. Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA, <http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/news/pressreleases/pressrelease20100204-report.html>) Our school district works very hard to maintain balance in our schools, and have each school reflect the diversity of our city. To have our state move in the opposite direction is a step backward academically, socially, democratically and morally.

Teacher evaluation

While monitoring teaching quality is of paramount importance in education, any provisions linking teacher evaluations and student test scores (in Raised Bills 440 and 5491) should be regarded with caution. Testing experts across this country have repeatedly warned that we cannot evaluate teachers based on student test scores until we are sure that those tests truly measure the value added by teachers- and the evidence is just not there.

One of this nation's foremost psychometricians, Professor Robert Linn at the University of Colorado, remarked in a recent paper for the National Academy of Sciences, "As with any effort to isolate the causal effects from observational data when random assignment is not feasible, there are reasons to question the ability of value-added methods to achieve the goal of determining the value added by a particular teacher, school or educational program." Another respected expert, James Popham, has further expanded on this warning. In a recent article (attached), he notes that one cannot evaluate teachers based on test scores unless two conditions obtain: (1) the presence of clear, teacher-understood testing targets and (2) the use of instructionally sensitive tests. Both conditions must be present before we even think of evaluating teachers based on tests. In the case of the first condition, most states, Connecticut included, have so many curricular standards that these clear targets are never present and teachers at best can guess at the specific targets in tests. With respect to the second condition, as Professor Popham explains, "An instructionally sensitive test will identify which students have been well

taught and which students haven't. But, at the moment, there is no evidence whatsoever that the tests being touted for test-based teacher evaluation are up to that task." Thus, while it is essential to ensure teaching quality, using a test not specifically designed to evaluate teacher quality will only lead to distortion and confusion. Improper measures of teacher quality will not help improve instruction- the goal we all seek to reach.

V. Conclusion

Expanding charter schools, and funding them at the expense of children in local public schools across this state, represent a sharp departure from Connecticut's present educational policy. Raised Bills 5493, 5491 and 438 threaten the viability of public school districts in order to serve a small percentage of children; charter school students. As we know, if Connecticut were to receive Race to the Top funds, and that is only a possibility, those funds are only temporary. However, the citizens of Connecticut will have to live with the effects of these drastic changes in educational practices and policies for a long time. It would be a disservice to all children and all taxpayers to upend our educational policy, with little or no study of the effects of this sea change, merely to chase after funds that would be only temporary and that we are not sure we would even receive. I respectfully request that, in considering educational legislation, you pay heed to the effect this legislation will have on all public school children in Connecticut. To advance the educational opportunities of a small segment of our children, at the expense of all others, does not fulfill our constitutional obligation to provide every child in Connecticut access to a quality public education.

Thank you.
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